

The *Sunday Guardian* brings to its readers an unconventional account of Kashmir by filmmaker and author **Shiv Kunal Verma**. The author of the highly acclaimed **1962: The War That Wasn't** and **The Long Road to Siachen: The Question Why** takes us into the back alleys of history and based on established historical facts and his own personal experiences, he weaves together not just a picture of what has been happening in the disturbed state but also how things can and should pan out. Having lived in Srinagar in the early part of his career where he reconnoitred and opened old routes between the Valley and Zaskar/Ladakh for **Tiger Tops Mountain Travel**, he also spent a lot of time in areas that are in the news today as his father was then commanding a brigade in Eastern Ladakh. Subsequently, working with the armed forces and otherwise, he has extensively filmed in the remotest corners of the region. This series of articles brings to the fore the ground reality and historical facts that need to be underscored especially by the younger generation of Indians, both inside and outside the region.

## Nights without End

### Four Days with the Hizbul Mujahideen

Shiv Kunal Verma

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At the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy for Administration in Mussoorie, my film *Kashmir: Baramulla to Kargil* was being screened on the very day the Government of India decided to nullify Article 370 and reconstitute the state of Jammu and Kashmir into two union territories. Twenty years after the film had been made, I couldn't help but think how little things had changed and how relevant it was even then. After the film was over I was asked my opinion on the latest developments. Good, bad, only time would tell, I answered, but one thing was for sure—the status quo had been broken where day in and day out, year after year, it had been the same story. In a scenario where positions had hardened over the years, each generation was growing up influenced by the narrative it was fed. A lot of it was perhaps coloured by individual experiences, but some core issues that were factual and not disputable would never change. The film brought back a tsunami of memories, for that had been the reality then, and it was perhaps even now much the same at the grass root level.

It was three in the morning on a pitch black January night in 1995, the temperature was further plummeting and the sides of the road had over ten feet of snow. Wearing a straw-coloured *phiran* over my jacket I had a Canon video camera with four spare batteries, a small tripod, half a dozen tapes and a slightly damaged ten-year old identity card that said I was from the *Associated Press*. Making me even more uncomfortable was a 9 mm Berreta tucked away in the waistband of my trousers, with two fully loaded magazines. The pistol was a last minute addition to my gear, handed to me by an army colonel after I had got out of his army *jonga* at Milestone 7. 'It's a captured weapon,' he had said, 'throw it away if you don't need it.' Before I could protest, he had driven away. He had spent the daylight hours trying to convince me not to accept the Hizbul Mujahideen's offer to film with them, but the

meeting had been arranged and though I was terrified at one level, I had decided to go ahead with the rendezvous. '*You're crazy,*' had been his mantra. At that moment I guess I agreed with him.

It was so cold there was no ambient sound, no crickets, no cicadas, not even a whisper. An hour seemed to be a lifetime and then out of nowhere someone had grabbed both my arms and a sack was put over my head. A voice told me to start walking, and with two men holding me I was frog marched roughly along. First I tried to count... twenty-five steps to the right... fifteen to the left but it was useless, so I gave up within the first minute itself. We must have been walking like that for half an hour, though I suspected we were still pretty close to where I had originally been picked up. We went up a stairway, and finally the sack was yanked off my head and my arms freed.

The room was carpeted with mattresses and it had about a dozen men, all wearing the trademark *phirans* looking at me. Each man had an AK-47, those who had come in with me were holding theirs, while those who were sitting there from before had their weapons by their side. A mild-mannered man with a bald head, whose voice I recognized as the one that told me to start walking, introduced himself as the '*Peer*' and for the next four days he was rarely more than two feet away from me.

A young girl, her head covered in a floral *hijab*, handed me a cup of tea that I gratefully accepted. Then the '*Peer*' started to introduce the others, starting with one man who had a pock-marked face and obviously was their king-pin. Meet Lieutenant General so-and-so... (I didn't catch his name, but I think he said Saibuddin or something like that... '*yeh yeha ke army commander hain... inhone army ka teen head shot kiya hai... aur baiaasi aurto ka balatkar kiya hai* (he is the local army commander and he has shot in the head three army personnel and raped eighty-two women). I couldn't believe my ears! I stopped the '*Peer*' and asked, 'Can I film the introduction?' Amazingly he said yes, so I put the camera on the tripod and started rolling... the introduction was repeated while pock-marked grinned hideously.

As I bent down to look through the viewfinder the pistol popped out of my waistband and fell with a 'thunk' on the thick rugs. My heart was in my mouth and I was grateful I was wearing a *phiran*, for I sank down and groped around for the weapon like a pregnant duck. I was feeling quite pleased with myself for having recovered the situation without anyone having noticed.

I had to conserve battery so I was filming selectively. I was asked to sit and make myself comfortable and drink my tea. Then the '*Peer*' said in his soft voice, '*Kunal saab, aap woh pistaul ko side mein rakh do. Chub rahi hogi* (why don't you put the pistol away? It must be poking you)'. All the men in the room, obviously in on the joke, burst out laughing. It would transpire later that they had been observing me the whole time with a night vision device. They were better equipped than most infantry units, even their communication systems were superior.

In the morning we went into a mosque. All the menfolk from the village were sitting inside. Armed with a mike, the '*Peer*' started his monologue... '*Hindustan ki hakumat*

(the government of India)' was getting it in the neck in lavish doses, so was the BSF and the army, who according to the 'Peer' believed in the mantra—if it moves, rape it! The red recording light was blinking, but this propaganda stuff was getting on my nerves. I got two or three quick shots of old men, the stubble on their chins white, listening and nodding in rapt attention. I stopped filming and did something very stupid—I interrupted the 'Peer' and asked him for the mike. I think he was a bit taken aback, for this was not in the script, but he gave me the microphone. I probably didn't need it, but it gave me the authority to speak. 'How many of you believe this nonsense,' I asked.

No one said anything, they were all watching me. At one level I was scared and my voice sounded as if my throat needed lubrication, but then I started to tell them what I knew was the background to Pakistan's invasion, the loot and the mass murders in Baramula, the abduction of women by the tribal *lashkars*, the Deed of Accession, the fighting at Shalateng, Patan, Baramula and Uri. Even the guys with the guns standing at the windows were listening. But no one was reacting, no nods of the head... they were just fixatedly looking at me.

How and when this finished, I don't remember, but as I was leaving the mosque walking a step behind the 'Peer', an old man with cataract in his one eye stopped me by tugging at my *phiran*. '*Hum kya karen janaab*,' he said loudly and clearly, he then let his gaze travel to the armed men around me, '*aap ki baat sach hai, lekin inke haath mein AK hain* (What can we do sir? There is truth in what you say, but they are the ones holding the guns).' The entire congregation behind the old man nodded their heads in agreement. The 'Peer' said nothing, just turned and walked away and I followed him.

At this point of time we were six years into the reign of terror, part of *Op Topac*, unleashed by General Zia, his master plan based on the principle that to wrest control of Kashmir, Pakistan must make India bleed by a thousand cuts. As time passed, I got to know the band of chaps around me reasonably well. They all thought I was a part of the Western media and they obviously had their instructions to ensure I wasn't harmed. I wasn't then aware of the back room deal that had got me into their midst, but I got to know the story later. CO 10 Bihar, Colonel Harsh Udai Singh Gaur, had been killed at Bazipura on 29 November in a firefight. He was a brave soldier who led from the front, and as luck would have it, he was the first casualty the battalion suffered. A la Galwan, the Biharis went berserk over the next few days, tracking down and killing some of the hard core militants. The noose tightening around him, a senior commander started negotiating his own surrender with the Intelligence guys. But before he surrendered, someone suggested maybe he could let me cross over and film the HM in action. I was somewhere near Kupwara when the Chief of Staff 15 Corps called and said, 'Are you willing to go across? We can arrange it!'

During those four days, I kept probing, trying to understand why young men in their early twenties could be enticed to live a life that would sooner or later meet a violent end. Religion? Not particularly, though on the face of it all the superficial trappings were visible. Ideology? Apart from the local politics of the immediate area they were

in, they seemed to have little idea or interest in the larger picture. Economics? Perhaps in the case of a few. The majority seemed to be there simply because it was perhaps the only way to protect their own families. And of course the language of the gun, which gave them unbridled power. It seemed incredible that this motely crowd and others like them could hold a state to ransom!

After their ham handed attempt to blame the army for the rapes and the loot, the HM guys didn't even bother with keeping up that pretence. Next 72 hours were crazy... gun fights, killings, dragging screaming women out of their homes holding pistols and carbines against their children's temples to force them to go with them, the wailing, the breast beating, the misery, the terror... and the constant lament, '*kya karen janaab, unke haath mein AK hai!*' became a blur in my mind. We were also hiding from army patrols, sometimes in lofts, sometimes in dark chambers dug below the floor boards. This was rural Kashmir and the horror was endless. Unable to charge my batteries, I kept shooting little snippets.

How exactly I got back to the army's side I don't remember. I was told to discard my *phiran* and start walking and was quickly intercepted and whisked away in a vehicle. That night I was with 13 Kumaon, my feet in hot water, my hands shaking with what I had seen. Everything was a blur after that... the moment I took off from Srinagar for Delhi, it felt as if I had crawled out of my shell as a new me. It was all so unreal... a different world which was hard to comprehend... and yet, there was the film. Neatly labelled tapes... thirty-four days of hard shooting.

The army chief, General Shankar Roy Chaudhuri saw the tapes, so did the PM, Narasimha Rao. Lt Gen Padmanabhan was the DGMI (later chief) and we screened the four tapes shot with the HM, unedited, to a select group of Ambassadors and Military Attaches and editors. *The Times of India* which was writing sanctimonious editorials about the army raping people suddenly changed its tune. And yet, we sat with that footage, not knowing exactly how to use it.

Then Kargil happened, four years later. I shot that too, again often wondering '*what the hell am I doing here?*' I had no official position, but since I had been filming with the army and the IAF extensively (and the navy I might add) during peace time, it seemed the logical thing to do. As things panned out, I was cleared to fly in helicopters with the rider that a senior officer must accompany me. As a result, I spent a lot of time with Major General VS Budhwar, GOC 3 Infantry Division, and he in turn had to buzz around the countryside with the doors removed from the army aviation cheetahs so that I could film unhindered. A loose unofficial system evolved where various channels were given footage of the fighting, the only condition put to them being don't use terms like '*Indian Occupied Kashmir*' etc. Even that seemed like a big achievement at the time.

Eventually, we decided that the story of Kargil made little sense without telling the post-Independent history of Kashmir. This allowed us to use all the footage that I had shot first with the IAF in 1992 and then painstakingly in Dec-Jan 1994/95. The film began with some of the scenes that we had shot with the HM during those tumultuous days when explosions in downtown Srinagar were so common place that

they hardly turned heads anymore. The final film, screened after the war for Bill Clinton and his entourage, had served its purpose then. Today, in a far more complex and tech-savvy world, the propagated narrative continues to distort issues and the threat has increased exponentially with China also openly entering the fray in Kashmir. It is therefore time for us to revisit certain key issues in the next few weeks to understand what exactly happened in Jammu and Kashmir.

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